

# Automotive Maintenance

consumer**brief**

Traveling by car can be one of the best ways to see New Jersey as well as one of the least expensive. However, car failure can spoil the best of plans. If traveling outside of the state most gas stations are self-service, so you will need to know how to check routine items yourself.

Be sure you know how to check your oil and always carry a rag for wiping the dip-stick clean. Be sure you also know how to check coolant levels and the battery if need be. Even checking your windshield wiper fluid is important, as is replacing worn wiper blades. At regular intervals inspect belts and hoses, tire pressure, and clean the windshield and headlights.

## BUYING GAS

Fill your gas tank before it is close to empty. You will have a better selection of stations and prices. This is also important in the winter to prevent gas-line freeze. Always check the station's pump to be sure the gallon and price gauge are at zero and that you are receiving the grade of gasoline you requested. If you ask an attendant to check under the hood, get out of the car and watch to be certain nothing is being done to make it appear you need a part or work that is unnecessary.

## WHEELS AND TIRES

When you check your tire pressure, take a look at tread wear. Uneven wear may mean an alignment problem. If there is a serious alignment problem, you may feel your car pulling to the left or right. Rotate your tires regularly, to promote even wear and long life. Buying new tires when needed may save you from fixing an inconvenient flat tire. Well defined treads reduce the risk of skidding on wet pavement.

Be sure you have checked the pressure in your tires before going on a trip, and don't forget the spare.

## BELTS

Be sure you know where your fan belt, power steering belt, and alternator belt are located and check them for slippage or breakage. If your car has air conditioning, learn where the unit is located. This unit will also have a belt. Be sure belts are under tension and there are no signs of cracks, peeling, splitting or glazing. Similarly, any cracks, bulges or softness in your hoses are a sign of trouble.

## BRAKES

If your brake pedal goes more than halfway to the floor, your brakes may need adjusting. Additionally, you may have brake problems if you feel your car pulling to the right or to the left when you stop.

## EMERGENCY TOOLS

In addition to the jack and the car manual, it would be wise to include safety flares, a first aid kit, a flashlight, duct tape (which is helpful in repairing hoses) and an extra quart of oil. If you would like to increase your level of preparedness, it would be useful to carry simple, yet effective tools such as a screwdriver and wrench. It would be prudent to carry a one-gallon gasoline can. In this age of modern technology, if affordable, a portable telephone is also suggested. And finally, a bottle of water is often useful, if not for yourself, for the radiator if it overheats on a hot summer day.

## DANGER SIGNS

If the alternator light comes on, drive to the nearest service station. If the oil pressure light comes on, pull off the road and stop. Most likely your oil level is low, and driving without oil will permanently damage the engine. Having the oil changed on a regular basis as well as following your manual's recommended maintenance guide, will help assure safer auto travel as well as a longer life for your car.

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